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Special Education

By: Chana Winner

Children born mentally challenged or disabled often get overlooked. These children are embedded with their own unique talents. For years special needs children were segregated from the mainstream student population; however, in recent years the approach has been to include these children in regular education classrooms to the fullest extent possible. The philosophy and movement of inclusion evolved gradually; these students benefit in a regular classroom by having peers of normal ability serving as role models.

An important concept to understand when dealing with special needs children is the difference between chronological age and developmental age. The difference between developmental and chronological age is defined by one's ability to accomplish something and their birthday, respectively. Developmentally a child is going to develop certain skills. Special needs learners lag in the developmental sequence; consequently, a child with special needs could be fifteen years old, but developmentally be at the level of a six year old. Special needs children have thirteen different diagnoses. Some of the special needs criteria include learning disabilities, mental retardation, food allergies, terminal illness, developmental delay; the children with learning disabilities are not dumb or lazy; their brains just process information differently.

Instruction and accommodations should be implemented for those requiring special education that are tailored to the students specific classifications. Parents need

to be advocates to make sure their children receive services, therapy, and inclusion classrooms. For a parent, having a child with special needs becomes overwhelming very quickly. Common concerns are getting appropriate care, promoting acceptance in the extended family, and school. The parents finally realize their child is not developing like others, and are afraid to label their child. Now CEC can help parents find support groups where experts will answer questions, or conferences that will help them feel a part of a community.

In special education the objective is to teach the child to reach their potential even though they might have challenges. For example, a 3rd grader wearing a hearing aid, going to a mainstream school, can live a rich rewarding life. A hundred years ago there were no hearing aids whereas, today a child with a hearing impediment can thrive. Some modifications and accommodations for special education students that need to be implemented are brail signs, elevators, and ramps (Sharon, A. Raver pg. 15). Historical attitudes toward special needs children has transformed over the centuries. Societies of Ancient Greece and Rome, the Dark ages, and the Enlightenment treated special needs children differently.

The historical attitude of the ancient Greeks and Romans questioned what could a child contribute to the state. Can he serve the state as a slave, worker, or even a future leader? The Greeks and Romans practiced infanticide. The social conditions of the society were atrocious, filled with plague,

pestilence, and poverty. The Greeks and Romans believed in the idea that a vital state arises from the strength of its citizens. They enacted laws designed to weed out those who could not contribute. As Aristotle said in his politics, "Let there be a law that no deformed child shall live." To the Greeks and Romans, children were the property of the commonwealth, only children of worth should live. In Sparta, according to the law, newborn babies were routinely brought before the elders to be examined on their fitness for citizenship. Those seen as having the potential to develop into warriors were adopted by the state. Infants found to be blind or otherwise disabled were thrown into the river, or abandoned in the wilderness. Additionally, a child with infections was thought to be destined to a short life span, consequently, they too were abandoned. Their mindset was that this child is another mouth to feed, especially if the child is limping. They did not want to give their precious resources to help, "A useless human being." In their mind a child who would become a burden to society would be better left to die in the sewers. The ancient Roman law of the twelve tables stated that the family is sacred and the authority is the male who is the head of the family. He possess the power of life and death over the family members. However, disabled children who survived were tolerated if they were of social value. For example, they were a source of household amusements to guests at parties. Emperor Augustus, "Loathed people who were dwarfish or in any way deformed, regarding them as freaks of nature and bringers of bad luck." (Margret, A. Winzer pg. 14, 15)

The fall of Rome led to the Dark Ages. During this time period, a big change

occurred related to the arrival of Christianity in Europe and "Judao Christian views". These standard beliefs made their way through Europe, ancient Greece and the, fall of Rome. Now, one sees a change as it makes its way throughout Europe. The concept of an individual being an object only worthwhile if they can provide something for the state is becoming less practiced. It became much less common for children to be abandoned or drowned. Additionally, nuns, monasteries compassionately started taking in the abandoned children. Nonetheless children were left to fend for themselves, they were starved and abused. Why such hostility? There was a notion if a child was flapping his hands, or rocking back and forth, it reflected demonic possession. Not figuratively, they really believed it. Churches practiced exorcism, which is when a priest removes demonic spirits from a child. This continues till today. The positive side Christianity brought out is that a child has soul, and killing is sin. The downside is if they had serious symptoms society thought the child was possessed by the devil. People interpreted the behavior of a mentally retarded person as evil and their mutterings as if they were talking to the devil. Historically, satanic possession lead to people killing and abandoning their children. Church law discriminated against disabled individuals and subjected them to unjust treatment. Parents thought they could take their child to a cemetery and scare the devil out of them. Another accepted form of therapy was when they put a mask on the child, and immersed them in water designed to get the devil out of them. Additionally, hospices and many facilities were established for the blind. Disabled people were deprived of the right to inherences or to testify in court. Martin Luther was part of the Christian religious reformation. He had a significant

impact on educational thinking and practice. Luther's many ideas were that all towns should have schools, and both boys and girls should be educated. Up until this time, education was almost exclusively for boys. Luther's emphasis on everyone reading the bible required that all children be taught basic academic skills. (Michael, L. Henniger pg. 36)

The Enlightenment is also known as the age of reason. The Enlightenment ideas influenced major educational reforms such as persons with disabilities being capable of learning. The most notable reformers for special education children were John Locke, Dr. Philip Pinel, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, and Edouard Seguin. Philosophers, scientists, and scholars of the Enlightenment believed that humanity should march progressively forward to a new and better world. (Allan, C. Ornstein, and Daniel, U. Levine pg. 88). John Locke's philosophy was, "Tabula Rasa" which meant a person was born with a blank slate. He downplayed the idea of nature, because kings said that they are naturally the king. John Locke stated that all men are created equal, which positively impacted special needs children.

Similarly, in 1793, Dr. Philip Pinel believed that special needs children should get special medical care and treatment. He held that special needs children should receive equality, dignity, and freedom. Pinel approached the mentally ill with more compassion and was influenced by the rights of the disabled. He spoke calmly to his patients rather than scaring them. He decided to separate children from adults, because putting a three year old and a 30 year old together in a room causes problems. Also Pinel ordered some patients, who he deemed harmless not to be chained for days.

Jean Marc Gaspard Itard was a doctor who was called the father of special education because he created the first Individualized Education Plan. In 1799 a boy was found in Aveyron, France in the woods. He had hair down to his back, was completely nude, and had scars all over his body. Scientists wanted to study, civilize, and humanize the "Wild Child." Scientists gave him the name Victor. A young doctor Itard spoke up and took on the responsibility of housing him. Itard perspective was focusing on what Victor could do and not what he could not do. He wanted to civilize Victor with the objectives of teaching him to speak and to communicate. Many questions were stirred that surrounded Victor. Was Victor normal, then became autistic, or was he abandoned because he was autistic? Who were his parents? Was he a product of an affair? These questions remain a mystery till today. Many people told Itard that he would be unsuccessful because Victor was considered a hopeless idiot. Itard didn't eliminate Victor's disabilities, but he improved Victor's behavior through systematic educative procedures. Itard had a student, Edouard Seguin, who established the first private school for the disabled in Paris. Seguin was dedicated to the education of individuals with intellectual disabilities. He wrote a book called the book of Treatise on Idiocy. Seguin wanted to teach with a different instructional approach. He felt that two successful lessons should not employ the same set of intellectual functions. Seguin recommended instruction for disabled students. He felt that an effective special educator should methodically maintain records about their students. (Gerard, Giordano pg. 101)

In 2016 the rights of children with disabilities improved, unlike in ancient Greece and the Dark Ages. In the past a child with disabilities would have been killed or abandoned. In the present, society is seeing the potentiality of success, when support is provided, regardless of a child's disabilities. For example, Stephen William Hawking has ALS and communicates using a speech-generating device. Although in a wheelchair, he became a theoretical physicist and created a theory called Hawking Radiation. The American value of equality for all citizens is reflected in our federal laws. Less than 50 years ago there were no federal policies for serving children with disabilities. The government's commitment to support the development of special needs children has increased. In the past there was, "Social Darwinism" which stated certain groups should be fruitful and multiply because they have high IQ. Charles Davenport said, "Immigrants, and the disabled, should not have children." He pushed to create a pure perfect society to only allow superior individuals to marry and have children. There was widespread involuntary sterilization,

which reached very high levels and it was a period of hatred for disabled persons.

In the present there have been many key legislative advancements in America. The most notable are The No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001, Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The No Child Left Behind Act components state that schools should have quality teachers, and students with disabilities should be able to be included in standardized testing. The IDEA law states children should get free appropriate learning from birth until 21 years old. Further progress is included in the ADA-Americans with Disabilities Act which bans discrimination in school, work, and restaurants. Organizations must accommodate special needs children for their disabilities ranging from ramps, special bathrooms, and brail so a worker with disabilities could be productive. Even colleges must make accommodations to allow special education students to achieve their maximum potential by allotting them more time on exams or assignments. (James, M. Kauffman and Daniel, P. Hallahan pg. 27)

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